

A LAND PROBLEM AHEAD

(FROM THE PEORIA JOURNAL.)

The Nebraska State Journal calls attention to the fact that Uncle Sam's opening of a 4,000-acre tract in the North Platte irrigation district for settlement practically winds up the "free land distribution" of the nation. It adds:

"Free or cheap land has been the American safety valve. A population straining for self-betterment has had its own remedy—to go west and grow up with the country. With the government reduced to advertising an opening of forty-three farms, the safety valve may be considered forever closed. The expansive energy formerly exerted outward, must hereafter work itself out intensively. Increasing land speculation, with rapidly rising prices of land and proportionately increasing dissatisfaction among the landless would seem inevitable. The tone of our politics and the intensity of our social problems cannot but be vitally changed under the strain of dealing internally with a social pressure which hitherto has had the wilderness to vent itself upon."

"Land hunger" will soon become a reality in this rapidly growing country and the constant pressure of population, increasingly higher than the ratio of production, is bound to bring us face to face with economic problems that we have heretofore considered remote. The far-sighted statesman and publicist must devote his thought earnestly to the consideration of these questions if we are to escape the extremes which curse the older nations of the world."

In the above will be found one of the reasons that the Canadian Government is offering 160 acres of land free to the actual settler. There is no dearth of homesteads of this size, and the land is of the highest quality, being such as produces yields of from 30 to 60 bushels of wheat per acre, while oats run from fifty to over hundred bushels per acre. It is not only a matter of free grants, but in Western Canada are also to be had other lands at prices ranging from \$12 to \$30 per acre, the difference in price being largely a matter of location and distance from railway. If one takes into consideration the scarcity of free grant lands in the United States it is not difficult to understand why there has been most material advances in the price of farm lands.

A few years ago, land that now sells for two hundred dollars an acre in Iowa, could have been bought for seventy-five dollars an acre or less. The increased price is warranted by the increased value of the product raised on these farms. The land that today can be had in Western Canada at the low prices quoted will in a less time than that taken for the Iowa lands to increase, have a proportionate increase. In Nebraska the lands that sold for sixteen to twenty dollars per acre seven years ago, find a market at one hundred and seventy-five dollars an acre, for the same reason given for the increase in Iowa lands. Values in these two States, as well as in others that might be mentioned, show that Western Canada lands are going at a song at their present prices. In many cases in Western Canada today, there are American settlers who realize this, and are placing a value of sixty and seventy dollars an acre on their improved farms, but would sell only because they can purchase unimproved land at such a low price that in another few years they would have as much as their friends have in the United States.

The worth of the crops grown in Western Canada is of higher value than those of the States named, so why should the land not be worth fully as much. Any Canadian Government Agent will be glad to give you information as to homestead lands or where you can buy.—Advertisement.

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GALLSTONES
GALLSTONES
GALLSTONES



CHAPTER XXVIII—Continued.

The light, gushing from the opaque hood, made the safe door a glare, and was thrown back into her intent young face. Even so, he would have recognized the sharp silhouette cut by her lithe, sweet body against the glow, the poise of her head, the carriage of her shoulders, the gracious bosom rounding her tailored coat.

She was all in black, even to her gloved hands—no trace of white or any color showing on her person but the fair curve of her cheek below the mask and the red of her lips. And if that were not enough, the intelligence with which she attacked the combination and the confident, businesslike precision that distinguished her every action proved her an apt pupil in that business.

His thoughts were all weltering in misery and confusion. He knew what this encounter meant, appreciated that it explained many things he would have thought questionable had not the strength of his infatuation forbade him to consider them at all; but in the pain and anguish of that moment he could entertain but one thought, which possessed him altogether—the thought that she must somehow be saved from the crime she contemplated.

But while he delayed, shrinking from the necessity of discovering himself to her, it was made clear that she had become sensitive to his presence. He had made no sound since she entered, had not even stirred; but somehow she had divined that someone was there, in the recess of the window, watching her.

In the act of opening the safe—working the combination from that very sheet of paper on which he had made memoranda of its sequence—he saw her pause, freeze to a pose of attention, then turn to stare directly at the portiere behind which he was concealed. And through an eternal second he watched her kneeling there, so still that she seemed not even to breathe, her gaze fixed and level, waiting for some sound, some tremor of the drapery folds to confirm her suspicion.

When at length she stirred it was to rise in one swift, alert movement. And now as she paused with her slight shoulders squared and her head thrown back defiantly, challengingly, he knew she knew he was there.

As if without will of his own, but drawn irresistibly by her gaze, he stepped out from hiding.

And since he was no more the Lone Wolf, but now a simple man in agony, with no consideration for their situation, with no thought for the fact that they were both housebreakers and that the slightest sound might raise a hue and cry upon them, he took a faltering step toward her, stopped, flung forth a hand with a gesture of appeal, and stammered:

"Lucy—you—"
His voice broke. He waited. She didn't answer other than to recoil as though he had offered to strike her, and she commenced to retreat, wearing a look of utter grief and wretchedness, until presently the table stopped her, and she leaned back against it, as if glad of the support.

"Oh!" she cried, trembling—"why—why did you do it?"

He might have answered her in kind, but self-justification passed his power. He couldn't say: "Because to-night you made me lose faith in life itself, and I thought to forget you by going to the devil the quickest way I knew—this way!"—though that was true. He couldn't say: "Because, a thief from boyhood, habit proved too strong for me, and I couldn't withstand temptation!"—for that was untrue.

He could only hang his head and wretchedly confess: "I don't know."

As if he hadn't spoken, as if she hadn't heard, she cried again. "Why—oh, why—did you do it? I was so proud of you, so sure of you—the man who had turned straight because of me! It compensated. But now!"

Her voice broke in a short, dry sob. "Compensated?" he repeated stupidly.

"Yes, compensated." She threw back her head with a gesture of impatience. "For this—don't you understand?—for this I'm doing! You don't suppose I've come here of my own accord—that I went back to Bannan for any reason but to try to save you from him? I knew something of his power, and you didn't; I knew, if I went away with you he'd never rest until he had you murdered, if he had to follow you round the world to do it! And I thought if I could mislead him by lies for a little time—long enough to give you opportunity to leave France—I thought—perhaps—if I could

overcome my terror of him—I might be able to communicate with the police, denounce him."

She hesitated, breathless and appealing. At her first words he had drawn close to her; and all their speech was couched in muted murmurings, barely more than whisperings. And this was quite instinctive, for in the passion of that meeting both had been carried beyond considerations of prudence, their most coherent thought being that now, once and for all time, all misunderstanding between them must be done away with.

And now, as naturally as though they had been lovers always, Lanyard possessed himself of her hand. "You cared as much as that!" he said.

"I love you," she declared tensely—"I love you so much I am ready to sacrifice everything for you—life, liberty, honor—"

"Hush, dearest, hush!" he begged, half distracted between joy and pain. "I mean it; if honor could hold me back, do you think I would have broken in here tonight to rob for Bannan?"

"He sent you, eh?" Lanyard commented in a dangerous voice.

"He was too cunning for me. I was afraid to tell you. I meant to tell—to warn you this evening in the cab. And then I thought perhaps if I were cold and distant and let you go on believing me the worst of women—perhaps you would go away, save yourself, forget me."

"Never!"

"I tried to carry out my program of lying to him, but he wouldn't have it. They forced the truth from me by threats."

"They wouldn't dare—"

"They dare anything, I tell you. But it wasn't threats of personal injury to me, but to you, if I refused to tell them the truth, the whole truth. They knew enough of what had happened, through their spies, to go on, and they tormented and bullied me until I broke down and told them everything. And when they learned you had replaced the jewels here, Bannan told me I must return and bring them to him. He said if I refused he'd have you killed before morning. I held out until tonight; then, just as I was going to bed, he received a telephone message, and told me you were driving a taxi and would be followed by Apaches and wouldn't live till daylight if I refused."

"You came alone?"

"No. Three men brought me to the gate. They're waiting outside in the park."

"Apaches?"

"Two of them—I presume they're Apaches, at least. The third is Captain Ekstrom."

"Ekstrom!" Lanyard cried in despair. "Is he—"

The dull but heavy slam of the great front doors silenced him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A Strange Interview.

Releasing the girl instantly, before the crash had ceased to reverberate within those walls, Lanyard slipped to one side of the doorway, whence he could command the perspective of salons together with a partial view of the front doors.

He was no more than established there, in the shadow and shelter of the portieres, when light from an electro-lamp flooded the reception hall.

It showed him first a single figure, that of a handsome woman well beyond middle age, but still well poised and vigorous of mien, a lady of commanding presence. She was in full evening dress of such magnificence as to suggest attendance at some function of state. Even had he not known well the features of Mme. Omber, he would have guessed her to be the mistress of the establishment.

Standing beneath the chandelier, she was restoring a key to a brocade handbag. This done, she turned her head and spoke over her shoulder. Promptly there came into view a second woman of much the same age, but even more strong and able of appearance—a woman in plain, dark garments, undoubtedly madame's maid.

Handing over her handbag, Mme. Omber unlatched the throat of her ermine cloak and surrendered it to the servant's hands.

Her next words were audible to the eavesdropper, and reassuring in so far as they indicated ignorance of anything amiss:

"Thank you, Sidonie. You may go to bed now."

"Many thanks, madame. Good-night, madame."



(Copyright, by Louis Joseph Vance.)

"Good-night."

The maid moved off toward the main staircase, while the mistress of the house turned deliberately through the salon toward the library.

At this, swinging back to the girl in a stride, and impulsively grasping her wrist to compel attention, Lanyard spoke in a rapid whisper, mouth close beside her cheek.

"This way," he said, imperatively drawing her toward the window by which he had entered. "There's a balcony outside—a short drop to the ground." And unlatching the window, he urged her through it. "Try to leave by the back gateway—the one I showed you—avoiding Ekstrom—"

"But you are coming!" she insisted, hanging back.

"Impossible. There isn't time for us both to escape undetected. I shall keep her interested only long enough to give you plenty of time to get away. But take this—and he pressed his automatic into her hand. "No—take it. I've another," he lied, "and you may need it. Don't fear for me, but go—oh, my heart—go!"

The footfalls of Mme. Omber were sounding ominously near by this time; and without giving the girl more time to protest, Lanyard thrust her forcibly through the windows, closed them, shot the latch and stole like a ghost round the farther side of the desk, pausing within a few feet of the screen and safe.

The footsteps were muffled by a rug in the drawing room—the woman was walking slowly, heavily, like one weary and thoughtful.

Where the girl had placed it, behind the cinnabar screen, the desk-lamp was still alight, and Lanyard knew that the diffusion of its reflected rays was enough to project his figure in silhouette against the glow distinctly visible to one on the threshold.

Now everything hung upon the temperament of the householder, how she would take that apparition—whether quietly, deceived by Lanyard's mummery into believing she had only a poor thievish fool to deal with, or with bourgeois hysteria.

In the latter event, Lanyard's hand was ready planted, palm down, on the top of the desk; should the other attempt to raise an alarm, a single bound would carry the adventurer across it in full flight for the front doors.

In the doorway the mistress of the house appeared and halted, quick, glinting eyes shifting from the glow on the floor to the dark figure of the thief. Then, with a quick gesture, putting forth a hand, she found the chandelier switch and turned on a blaze of light.

As this happened Lanyard covered, lifting an elbow as if to guard his face—as if expecting to find himself under the muzzle of a revolver.

The gesture had the calculated effect of focusing the attention of the woman directly to him, after one swift glance round had taken in the curtains that were still swaying at the window, and shown her a room tenanted only by herself and a cringing thief. And immediately it was made manifest that, whether or not deceived, she meant to take the situation quietly, if with a strong hand.

Her eyes narrowed and the muscles of her square and almost masculine jaw stood out ominously as she looked the intruder up and down in silence. Eventually a flicker of contempt moderated the grimness of her dark countenance. She took three steps forward, stopping on the other side of the desk, her back to the doorway.

Lanyard trembled visibly. "Well!"—the word boomed like the opening gun of an engagement. "Well, my man!"—the shrewd eyes swerved to the closed door of the safe and quickly back—again—"you don't seem to have accomplished a great deal!"

Lanyard gripped the edge of the desk, quivering.

"For God's sake, madame," he blurted in a husky, shaken voice, nothing like his own—"don't have me arrested! Give me a chance! I haven't taken anything. Don't call the flics!"

He paused, lifting an uncertain hand toward his throat, as if his tongue had gone dry.

"Come, come!" the woman answered, with a look almost of pity. "I haven't called anyone—as yet."

The fingers of one strong white hand were drumming gently on the top of the desk; then, with a movement so quick and sure that Lanyard himself could hardly have bettered it, they slipped to a handle of a drawer, jerked it open, closed round the butt of a revolver and presented it at Lanyard's head.

Automatically he lifted his hands.

"Don't shoot!" he cried. "I'm not armed—"

"Is that the truth?"

"You've only to search me, madame!"

"Thanks!" Madame's accents now discovered a trace of somewhat dry humor. "I'll leave that to you. Turn out your pockets on the desk there—and remember, I'll stand no nonsense!"

The weapon covered Lanyard steadily, leaving him no alternative but to obey. As for that, he was glad of the excuse to listen for any sound to indicate how the girl was faring in her flight. And he made a pretense of trembling fingers to cover the slowness with which he complied.

But he heard nothing.

When at length he had visibly turned every pocket inside out, and their contents lay upon the desk, the woman looked them over incuriously.

"Put them back," she said curtly. "And then fetch that chair over there—the one in the corner. I've a notion I'd like to talk to you. That's the usual thing, isn't it?"

"How?" Lanyard demanded with a vacant stare.

"In all the criminal novels I've ever read, the law-abiding householder always sits down and has a sociable chat with the housebreaker—before calling in the police. I'm afraid that's part of the price you've to pay for my hospitality."

She paused, eyeing Lanyard inquisitively while he replaced his belongings in his pockets. "Now get that chair," she ordered, and waited, standing until she had been obeyed. "That's it—there! Sit down."

Resting herself against the side of the desk, the revolver held negligently, the speaker favored Lanyard with a second inspection, at her leisure, the hardness of her eyes modified, and that anger which primarily had marked her countenance gone by the time she chose to pursue her catechism.

"What's your name? No—don't answer! I saw your eyes waver, and I'm not interested in a makeshift alias. But it's a stock question, you know. Do you care for a cigar?"

She opened a mahogany humidor on the desk and extracted a box. "No, thanks."

"Right—according to Hoyle—the criminal always refuses to smoke in these scenes. But let's forget the book and write our own lines. I'll ask you an original question: Why were you acting just now?"

"Acting?" Lanyard repeated, intrigued by the acuteness of this masterful woman's mentality.

"Precisely—pretending you're an ordinary criminal. For a moment I actually believed you afraid of me. But you're neither that nor a common crook. How do I know? Because you're unarmed; your voice has changed in the last two minutes to that of a cultivated man; you've stopped cringing and started thinking; and the way you walked across the floor just now and handled that chair showed me how powerfully you're made. If I hadn't found this revolver you could overpower me in an instant—and I'm no weakling, as women go. Then why the acting?"

Studying his captor with narrow interest, Lanyard smiled faintly and shrugged, but made no response. He could do no more than this—no more than spar for time. The longer he indulged this woman in her whim for the bizarre, the more assured were Lucy's



"Lucy—You—"

chances of escape. By this time, he reckoned, she must have found her way through the service gate to the street. But he was on edge with apprehension of mischance.

"Come, come!" Mme. Omber insisted. "You're hardly civil, my good man. Answer my question."

"You don't expect me to—do you?"

A glint of anger shone in the woman's eyes.

"You're right," she said shortly; "I dare say Sidonie isn't asleep yet. I'll get her to telephone while I stand guard over you."

Bending over the desk, without removing her gaze from the adventurer, his captor groped for, found and pressed a call-button.

From some remote quarter of the house sounded the grumble of an electric bell.

"Pity you're so brazen," she commented. "Just a little less side, and

(Continued on next page.)

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